

TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF THE GA PEOPLE

by

J. H. NKETIA

Reprinted by kind permission of the Editor of UNIVERSITAS

It is easy for the visitor to Accra to imagine that the activities of bands like the Tempos Band, Blackbeats Band and Rhythm Aces are representative of the musical practice of the Ga people of Ghana today. Modern Ghana music, however, has not ousted the traditional musical types used in Ga area even though it has decreased their supporters by setting up a new community of taste. Traditional music and dancing associated with ceremonies of the life cycle worship, festivals and indeed with recreation are still practised in Ga villages and towns as well as in Accra by those for whom these activities still constitute part of their way of life.

Much of this music is vocal music with or without instrumental accompaniment. The instrumental emphasis is invariably on drums and idiophones (gongs or bells, rattles, etc.). Wind instruments—in the form of horns—are restricted to chiefs, or in a few instances to senior gods (e.g. *Sakumo* of Tema). There appears to be no survivals of traditional flute or stringed instruments.

A summary of the characteristics of this music is given subsequently, beginning with the music of idiophones and drums.

IDIOPHONES

Of the idiophones used in Ga society, gongs (*NoNo*) are the commonest. These are used both as 'time keepers' and accompanying instruments. In the music of *Kple*, the principal cult of the Ga people, they may be used alone for providing the rhythmic basis of the mass stamping dance commonly called *obene Simo*.

One or two gongs may be used, each one playing a different rhythm pattern. These rhythms are treated in two ways. In the first case each gong plays an *unchanging* rhythm pattern, maintaining a steady tempo throughout the entire performance. The beginning of such a rhythm pattern recurs at regular intervals and the inter-relations of the constituents of the pattern are maintained throughout. (See Fig. 1). It is thus easy for a singer or a drummer to find his 'bearing' by listening to the beats of the gong. The rhythm pattern is therefore a guiding principle and it is in this sense that the gong may be referred to as a 'time keeper'. If the gong player falters, he throws everybody off.

The second method of using gongs emphasises their function as accompanying instruments. (See Fig. 2). One or both of the gongs may play a number of rhythm patterns in much the same way as drums may be used, while maintaining a steady tempo. This treatment of gongs is commonly found in the music of *Kple*.

In addition to gongs, rattles and stamping tubes (made of short pieces of hollow bamboo of twelve to sixteen inches) are used. These are found in the music of *adowa*, a traditional dance performed mainly by women. They are played in such a way as to emphasise the regulative pulse set by the gongs.

I have not come across scraped idiophones in Ga area. Plucked idiophones are rare; the only one I have found is a modern variety of the hand piano. This instrument is used mainly in *sonte*, a modern popular music in the traditional style. It is treated as a percussive instrument, and the box on which the metal prongs are assembled is hit from time to time to reinforce the effect of drums which the player attempts to imitate.

The practice of using idiophones as 'time keepers' and accompanying instruments is very widespread in Ghana. Wherever they are used, their noises are considered an essential part of the music. In the musical types in which they are used, their absence is

regarded as an impoverishment and substitutes in the form of empty bottles, sticks or even clicks of the thumb and the middle finger may be used.

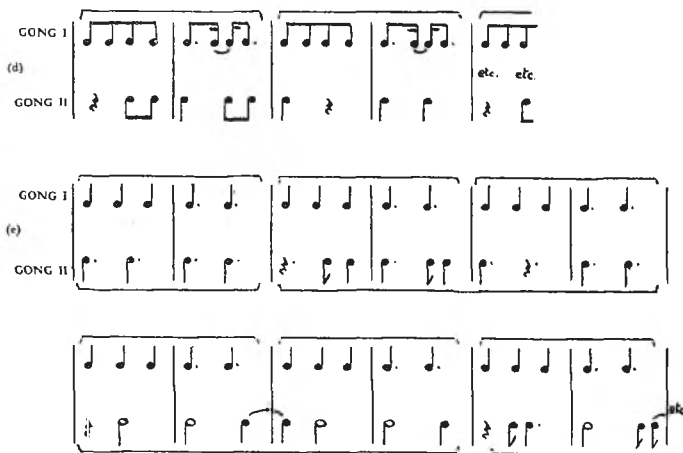
EXAMPLES OF GONG RHYTHMS

Figure 1.



Figure 2.

Elaborate Combinations



DRUMS

Of greater importance than idiophones are drums—the chief musical instruments of Ghanaians and other West Africans. In Ga society, hourglass drums and closed cylindrical drums are used in one of the traditional musical types performed for chiefs. Apart from these, all the drums of the Ga are single-headed open drums. They include heavy drums (*obonu*), and talking drums (*atumpān*) found at the courts of chiefs as well as medium and small drums used in cult music and the music of certain traditional associations.

Four techniques of drumming are commonly employed, the choice depending on the type of drum and the 'mode of drumming' to which it is applied. Hourglass drums are played by stick and armpit control technique. Heavy *obonu* drums, *atumpān* (talking drums), small drums and a few medium-sized drums are played by stick technique. Other drums such as the master drum of *asafo* (the music of warrior organisations) are played by stick and hand technique, while sonorous drums capable of distinct tonal variations are played by hand or finger technique.

The noises resulting from the application of these techniques are grouped in orderly sequences according to certain established procedures. Two musical features are commonly exploited in these sequences, viz., rhythm and tone. The treatment of these varies. In some contexts only the rhythms are emphasised, while in others both rhythm and tone are given prominence. In the latter case attempts are made to provide for tone contrasts either by applying a suitable drumming technique which enables the drummer to achieve such tone contrasts on a single drum, or by assembling together drums of different pitches whose individual rhythms are so arranged as to enable these tone contrasts to be displayed.

The fascination of what is commonly described as "cross rhythm" in African drumming lies in the fact that contrasts in the individual rhythms played by each drum are heightened by tone contrasts. The beats of a small high-pitched drum may be heard in between some of the beats of an "alto" drum, while those of the "alto" drum may come in between those of the "tenor" drum. This procedure results in a sequence of tone contrasts which give the aural impression of a "melodic phrase" or a series of "melodic phrases", each of which is repeated a number of times. An expert drummer can convey this impression—which is really what all the players of a drum ensemble aim at—by means of nonsense syllables or even a verbal phrase whose intonation and rhythm resemble the drum phrase.

The habit of associating drum rhythms with language appears to be widespread¹. In Akan musical practice, there are a number of traditional verbal texts which are used for this purpose, and which are conveniently used on teaching young drummers to drum particular pieces.² The idea of "crossing", implying a large measure of independent movement of a polythymic structure, is impressed on the young mind, for it is not so much the drum beats which coincide that are important as those which do not.

The impression of a melody or a 'melodic phrase' can be created by means of a single drum or a pair of drums of different pitches. In Ga *adowa* music, for example, where only one drum is used, the drummer aims at playing not just rhythm patterns but 'melodic phrases'. He does so by using the hand or finger technique which enables him to get a number of tone contrasts. He makes judicious use of clear beats or muted beats played at the edge or the centre of the drum. He achieves other effects by varying the formation of the hand or the parts used for hitting the drum surface. But, of course, in large ensembles, there are opportunities for working out more elaborate contrasts between all the drums, or between the leading drums, the lesser drums or other groups of drums. There is scope for dynamic contrasts or for intensifying the rhythm occurring at a particular point in the music by assigning it to two or more drums playing concurrently. In Ga drumming these variations are displayed most clearly in the drumming of *obonu*, *asafo* and *kple*.

The use of cross rhythms without the addition of tone contrasts is not often successful. If you had four drums of the same size and pitch playing different rhythms at the same level of pitch, the impression of crossing would be very slight or indeed confused. Hence wherever a number of drums are played together, you will find that they are graded in size and pitch. Where drums of approximately the same size are used they may be tuned differently or assigned rhythm and tone patterns which can be clearly contrasted. But this depends on the 'mode of drumming' to which they are applied.

It will be seen from the foregoing brief description of drumming that the drummers of an ensemble cannot just drum what catches their fancy. They have to know what is required of them in respect of rhythm and tone. They have to know the basic parts

¹ See NKETIA: 'Yoruba Musicians in Accra' ODU (Journal of Yoruba and Related Studies) No. 6, 1958.

² See NKETIA: 'The Role of the Drummer in Akan Society'. *African Music* Vol. 1, No. 1.

assigned to each drum and how they are intended to be combined. For although the resources of drums are limited, they can be arranged in different ways so as to produce drum pieces which can be clearly distinguished from one another.

MODES OF DRUMMING

Before leaving the subject of drumming, it may be of interest to add a brief note on the 'modes of drumming' employed in Ga society, in terms of which drum noises are selected and arranged. Three forms may be distinguished.

- (i) signal mode of drumming
- (ii) speech mode of drumming, and
- (iii) dance mode of drumming.

In signal drumming a short rhythm pattern or a restricted number of such short rhythm patterns are assigned to a single drum playing alone. These rhythms are not intended for dancing. Accordingly they are not heightened by tone contrasts. They lack the regularity of pulse characteristic of dance music, and are accordingly not combined with idiophones. The rhythms are played over and over again for about a minute after which the drummer stops. They may not be drummed again until some considerable time has elapsed.

The drums used in this manner are called *tsoisin* (the equivalent of the Akan *twenesin*), and are found only at the courts of Ga chiefs. They are used for heralding the approach of a chief during processions or for drumming call signals warning signals. The short rhythms played for heralding the approach of a particular chief may be based on a verbal text of some significance to that chief. In this case, the drum only attempts to imitate the rhythm of the text. It does not attempt to reproduce the intonation of the text, for signal drums are not designed to be used as "talking" drums.

In the second mode of drumming, attempts are made to imitate speech by reproducing the rhythm and *intonation* of verbal texts. The drum noises so produced are then re-interpreted by the listener in terms of those verbal texts. The aural impression of the drumming is that of flowing, relaxed drum rhythms with a two-tone frame-work.

It is not difficult to recognise this mode of drumming when it is employed. To be able to interpret it, however, one has to learn it as a "restricted" language. One had to build up definite associations between drums and language by listening constantly to instances of drum noises and their verbal correlates. Accordingly the extent of the knowledge of individuals vary. With many people it appears to be limited to the interpretations of a few rhythm patterns, particularly those used in the dancing ring for congratulating people.

Any drum capable of pitch variation such as *aneg'e*, *oblente*, (the equivalent of the

THREE GA CRADLE SONGS

1. ENYE HU NTAO MONI YAA

E - nye hu n- ta-o mo-nii yaa ee- ni e-se le e-tse. e-nye

A - wo De- de-o, ba ni ma-wo. si-e-nye kpakpa, ba ni ma-wo

2. KAAFO



3. MIBI LE BAADA



Akan *operenten*) and the master drum of *asafo* can be used in this mode of drumming. The drums most commonly employed, however, are the *atumpam* drums.

The language of the speech mode of drumming, and of signal drumming based on a text is invariably Akan (Twi-Fante)³. There does not appear to be an established tradition of drum language based on Ga.

The third mode of drumming is the dance mode of drumming. This is by far the most frequently used. Except in *mpintin* music drums used in this mode are accompanied by gongs, or gongs and rattles. In *Oshi* music, the horn of a unicorn is used in place of the gong. The drums and gongs may be played alone (as in *obonu* music) or more frequently combined with singing.

In this mode of drumming, single drums and idiophones may be used for playing the required dance rhythms, as for example in *adowa* music and dancing, or the music performed at story telling sessions at wake keeping.

Ensembles of two drums of different size and pitch are also found, as in the music

³ For examples of these texts see:
NKETIA J. H.:

- (i) 'The Role of the Drummer in Akan Society' *African Music* Vol. 1.
- (ii) 'The Poetry of the Akan' *Black Orpheus*, No. 3.
- (iii) (a) 'The Poetry of Drums—the Awakening'.
- (b) 'Drum Proverbs' in *Voices of Ghana*, an anthology edited by H. V. L. Swanky.

of *Oshi*, the special royal dance of the harvest festival of *Homowo* as celebrated in Accra⁴. Larger ensembles are found at the courts of Ga chiefs in the music of *obonu* and *mpintin*. But the usual drum ensemble of the Ga consists of three drums.

The instrumental music of the Ga, then, is a composite of Ga and Akan derived forms each of which is associated with a particular institution or a social organisation. The Akan forms are commonly linked with the traditional political organisation, and later cults, while the indigenous forms are associated with worship, festivals and other aspects of Ga social life. There is, however, a common meeting ground of Akan and Ga forms in the music of recreation.

VOCAL MUSIC

The resources of Ga vocal music are not as limited as one finds in a number of Ghanaian societies, though the actual musical types that are created out of them are not necessarily more varied, nor are the texts of Ga songs richer in poetry.

Two scales are used. There is the pentatonic scale as well as the heptatonic, the common eight note diatonic scale. Both types of scales are found in African societies, but each society generally specialises in one of them and develops its own realisation of it in terms of sizes of intervals, modality and harmonic usages. In Ghana the pentatonic peoples include the Adangme, the Dagbamba, 'Prafra' (Tallensi), Dagbarba, etc., while the heptatonic (eight note) peoples include the Akan, Interior Ewe, the Kassena-Nankani and the Builsa.

The Ga people belong to both groups, but they have greater inclination towards the heptatonic. The intonation of both scales as realised by the Ga is similar and shows greater affinity with the usages of the heptatonic peoples than with those of the pentatonic peoples. Though of the same tribal stock as the Adangme, the Ga people are in this connection musically separated from the Adangme.

The pentatonic scale appears to be older in Ga society than the heptatonic. It occurs principally in the cult music of *Kple*, and certain types of occasional music such as the songs of *Osi* of Ga *Masi* (Accra), or the lampoons of *Kpa* music performed at the annual festival of Labadi. The scale is commonly found in two modes, with 'doh' or 'lah' as tonic. I have not come across other arrangements of the pentatonic which one finds in Adangme music.

The heptatonic on the other hand occurs mainly in Akan derived music—*adowa*, *asafo*, *otn*, *akon* (*akom*) and in popular Ga music, such as maiden songs (*adaawe*), song interludes in games and folk tales, songs of traditional popular bands like *sonte*, *oge*, *tuumatu*, *awaa*, *soulele* etc. As in Akan music, various modal arrangements of the scale are used.

Both types of scale or variations of them are sometimes found in one musical type. (Cf. transcriptions of songs).

HARMONY

Singing in the pentatonic may be in unison or in harmony. The harmonic progressions, as exemplified in *kple* music, are rather different from that of the Adangme.⁵ Chordal endings are quite common and are realised in thirds. Occasionally a full triad is used. In other positions a wide variety of intervals is used: the harmonising parts (the part of a cantor and that of a chorus or chorus breaking into two parts) move in all directions: They may proceed by parallel motion (in which case both parts move in the same direction) or they may proceed by contrary motion (both parts moving towards each other from opposite directions) or by oblique motion (one part remaining stationary

⁴ See E. M. BARNOR: Explanation of '*Ga Homowo*'. Government Printer 1924.

⁵ See NKETIA J. H.: 'The Organisation of Music in Adangme Society' *Universitas* Vol. III, No. 1.

while the other moves up or down). Accordingly intervals of third, fifth, sixth and the octave are used. Fourths and sevenths also occur frequently but they are always resolved. Parallel fourths, fifths are therefore not characteristic of Ga pentatonic songs.

FORM AND LANGUAGE

In common with other African peoples, the Ga design their songs intended to be sung by a group for rendering by a cantor or a number of cantors and a chorus. For every type of dance involving singing there is always someone recognised as cantor or "father of songs" (called *lalatse* by popular bands, *olai* by *kple* worshippers, *tekrema* by *otu* worshippers and so on).

The overall form of the verse resulting from the interplay of cantor and chorus differs from one song type to another. In *kple* music, the majority of the songs are founded on a short couplet which is repeated once or twice.

The language of Ga songs is not always Ga. It may be Ga, Akan (Twi/Fante) or a mixture of the two. The use of Twi words, phrases and sentences in the course of songs which are mainly in Ga is also fashionable even in modern popular music. Sometimes the same idea is stated in two successive sentences in two languages: Thus "who will speak for me?" is sung as *Woana beka ama me* (Akan) and later as *Moni bawie ba mi* (Ga).

In *kple* songs, Awutu elements are admitted. Dr. Field claims to have taken down "songs containing Ga, Obutu and Adangme, all in one sentence".⁶ As a result of this habit of mixing lexical elements derived from different sources, the texts of Ga songs are not readily understood. Often they are intelligible only to those who speak Ga, Twi and in some cases Awutu. Accordingly there is a tradition of bilingualism in Ga communities, particularly among musicians and other artists. However imperfect a singer's Twi or Fante may be, he strives to perpetuate the tradition of singing *Adowa*, *asafo*, *otu*, *akon* (*akom*) which are Akan derived musical types, in the Akan language, and to use both Ga and Akan in other contexts.

It will be seen from the foregoing summary that traditional Ga music is a composite of indigenous musical traditions. It is illustrative of the kind of change that interested tribal societies in the field of music before the impact of Western music began to be felt. In a succeeding paper on the contextual distribution of musical types in Ga society, I shall show how this change was in the past linked with certain aspects of social change

⁶ *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People*, p.16.